

Wire Cutter

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Wire Cutter

by [CalicoCat](#)

Summary

Tokyo, near future: electrons flow through the populace and through the world, carried on fibers that permeate almost every object. In this universe of information, Ryuko and Satsuki are near perfect complements: a cyborg and her wholly human sister, leading double lives within the shadow world of cyber-espionage.

Notes

Consider this a "pilot episode", if you will. So if some things don't appear to be explained, it's because perhaps I'll return to this AU at some point...

Static, static interspersed with song. A talk show.

“... would you say that...”

Static. J-Pop. K-Pop. Ethereal whistling. L-Pop. Static.

Garbled word fragments. An orchestra. Static. A tiny shift in frequency.

“Blue Angel. Blue Angel. Blue Angel. This is Red Devil. Comm check, fifteen hundred zulu, Over.”

“Red Devil. This is Blue Angel. Payload secured. Over.”

From the floor of the industrial complex, between the metal runners that guided robot palettes from production to shipping, you could only see a cathedral of steel spars disappearing into darkness far above. Hidden in the intricate metal lacework, high above pressure sensors and the fields of view of security cameras, and jammed into a void little more than half a yard wide, was a smudge of black that might have been a young woman.

The concrete in the roof space was rough with corrosion-proofing, a richly textured surface that suction cups couldn’t adhere to, so instead she had knees and elbows wedged against the opposing walls, thighs and biceps straining to hold her in suspense. It was far from comfortable, but she could hold the position a little longer, long enough to update her partner on her progress.

“Ya gonna be at the extraction point on time?”

The voice in her earbuds was distorted, garbled slightly by the encryption of the ultra-low bandwidth connection they used, hidden amongst semi-sentient machine chatter, music stations and ham radio. And, as usual, after one exchange the other participant had dropped all pretense at military procedure.

“That will not be a problem.”

Her lips moved soundlessly, her data visor scanning mouth shapes into phonemes – packaging words into syllables for broadcast. At the receiving end the listener snickered as she switched out the detailed audio model that almost flawlessly recreated her sister’s voice for one based on a popular cartoon character.

“Kay, Doraemon. I hear ya.”

In the elaborate mental space that Ryuko Matoi was partially inhabiting at that moment, a frowning emoji popped into view. Its eyebrows were particularly intimidating.

“And I can tell when you’re scowlin’. Your suit sends that too.”

A stream of emoticons appeared for a moment in a judgmental procession, and then vanished.

“Remind me to disable that feature when this mission is complete.”

“Be easier if ya just got a neural link, Sis.”

In her aerial cubby-hole, Satsuki Kiryuin shook her head slightly. *This again.*

“No implants.”

Her sister wasn’t sending emotional context with her messages, but Satsuki didn’t need to see a cartoon face to sense eyes being rolled.

“Fine, fine, Lady Hundred-Percent-Human...”

The mission time ticked on another minute in the corner of Satsuki’s field of view, a green progress counter again the grey of the data visor’s night vision mode. She’d have to get moving or she’d miss the rendezvous. Bracing one knee and the opposite forearm against the concrete, taking her weight solely on them, she moved her other arm and leg forward. The surface of the stealth suit slipped for a moment and then held, causing an involuntary gulp. Conversation... would be a welcome distraction at this point.

“Just where are you, Ryuko?”

Ryuko wriggled a little, shrugging her shoulders. It was relaxing in the Wired, like floating in a warm bath, but her body wasn’t particularly comfortable. There was something, maybe a stubby little antenna, digging into the small of her back.

“Need to know, Sis. Need to know.”

Satsuki mouthed a few commands, and picture-in-picture in her visor showed Ryuko’s field of view: black sky and stars, clear and sharply defined. Not a hint of the evening’s earlier rainclouds. She accessed another data feed, and the suit sent another frown to her distant sister.

“Your altimeter says you’re at ten thousand feet.”

The picture-in-picture went blank, taking the altitude feed with it.

“Hey! Hey! Wha’d I say ’bout using my senses without permission?”

Her muscles were beginning to burn with the exertion, but even so Satsuki couldn’t help but make a little smile. Was it below the suit’s detection threshold? She wasn’t entirely sure.

“My apologies.”

Brace an arm and a leg. Release the others. Shift forward. Brace again. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat. Better just not to think about it. There were a few yards to go and then she could drop down onto pipes and cable trunking that crossed the roof void at right angles.

“Still... I wear my jeans pretty tight, don’t I?”

The suit did send a smile then; and it was more fortunate still that it couldn't read skin tone and send the blush that went with it.

The pipes were below her now, and far, far below them, picked out in noisy greys by the data visor, the robot cargo carriers went about their nightly business. Satsuki let her legs swing down gently onto the support, testing it, assessing its soundness, and then let it take her full weight, relaxing first into a crouch and then lying along it as she caught her breath.

Another silent command.

"Map."

She could see where she was now: on top of an artery of subcircuits and subnets that fed this building from the central core.

"Can ya see the platform? With the skylight?"

About thirty yards distant, along the path of conduit, she could see where the solid roof opened up into a pyramid of reinforced glass above an access platform.

"I see it."

The lactic acid in her muscles had dissipated now; she raised herself up into a low crouch and began a careful run along the narrow pathway.

"There's an access ladder on the left. You'll need to hack the lock, but it'll get ya onto the roof."

Satsuki ducked down under an I-beam, then vaulted like a hurdler over another set of pipes. Disappointingly, her elegant movements won her nothing beyond a slightly less than innocent laugh over the radio.

"Move sharp, Kiryuin. I'm two mikes out, and I can't hold this baby up by much."

The pipes turned to the side a few yards off the platform; it wouldn't be a matter of just dropping down. So she accelerated slightly, setting herself a target close to the center of the platform and gaining a vital extra burst of speed in the last few yards. Her right leg met the end of the pipe-run, compressed, pushed her off hard into space, and she felt momentarily weightless as she propelled herself towards the landing point. Satsuki made the landing like a parachutist, absorbing her energy with a controlled fall and roll, and then stood smoothly. Ryuko, whatever electronic naïf she'd co-opted and however it was she was travelling, was surely close now; there'd be just enough time to open the access-way and get onto the roof.

The hammer-blow thumped her in the chest, knocking her off her feet and sending her spiraling perilously close to the edge of the platform. An instant later the crack of a gunshot reached her, dry thunder in the enclosed space of the complex. The impact had knocked one of her earbuds loose, and above the ringing in her ears she could hear Ryuko's shouts in mono now, distorted and desperate like an SOS recovered from an antique radio.

“...tsuki! Satsuki! What the hell happened!” Warnings across the data visor were flashing reds and oranges in sympathy. “Your vitals just went crazy!!”

Her chest ached when she breathed, but it was a dull ache, not a sharp stabbing pain – she’d probably escaped a broken rib or two, just about. Above her, a second and third shot ricocheted off the latticework of beams, but where she’d fallen had been fortuitous – the sniper seemed unable to depress their angle of fire enough to draw a bead on her. Keeping her head as close to the safety of the platform as she could, Satsuki looked down at her chest – a large slug, 50 caliber most likely, was flattened and wedged halfway through the composite plate that covered her heart.

She allowed herself a little sigh and let the breath carry a fragment of her ghost skywards. One more life down. She would have to adopt another cat from the municipal shelter, assuming she made it out alive; little Yomi was down to the last of her nine lives now – that was all Satsuki would have to get her through this troublesome encounter.

Fresh fish for all of you when I get home. Kuro, Shiro, Maru, Yomi. And a new sibling to keep you company and annoy Ryuko. When I get home. When I get home.

“Satsuki!!” Ryuko was still shouting in one ear.

“I appear to have a late night entanglement.”

“Hold on, Sis! I’m comin’!”

Another shot and then a pause. Satsuki was walking through the winter forests near the mansion again, the iron jaws of the mantrap just visible in the snow in front of her. Should she drive a branch into it and trigger it at a time of her own choosing, or should she go around and risk whatever snares lay hidden beneath the crisp, white surface? Was the sniper reloading, or simply waiting for her to rise before putting a bullet neatly between her eyes, her last vision the slow-mo cracking of the data visor as the shell shattered it?

The instinctive, animal part of her brain was trying to bind her limbs with lead, convinced in a wordless wash of adrenalin that stillness would be the only path to safety: the certainty of wide eyes frozen before oncoming headlights. But not to know the disposition of the enemy was tactically unacceptable, so she pulled a slim, telescopic rod from her utility harness and armed the little CCD camera at its tip. Then she flicked it up, letting it extend to its full length, and swung it about in a chaotic, unpredictable, pattern.

There. Off to the side, another platform like the one she was lying on. A petite figure was waving a large caliber sniper rifle around like it was a child’s toy, and Satsuki tried to position the camera to permit a better view. Just as the image in the data visor stabilized, however, the figure brought the rifle to their hip, like a caricature of a cowboy with a six-gun, and a moment later the image dissolved in static as the camera shattered into fragments of plastic and silicon.

Zastava M93.

Five round magazine.

Move.

NOW.

Satsuki rolled over and up, heading towards the access ladder and readying her electronic lock-pick with one hand. The stealth suit's external mics picked a short burst of speech from the other platform.

“Merde! Ce un fusil idiot!”

There was a moment's silence, and then a crash of resonating metalwork as something landed between her and the ladder, making the platform rock with the force of its impact. The small figure straightened up, shaking her head and making cascades of fine blonde hair undulate around her. She raised the rifle up with a shrug.

“I keep breaking my toys.”

The bolt was jammed, visibly bent out of shape, an apparent victim of the sniper's impatience to reload. The blonde girl chuckled and then brought the rifle down, two-handed, across her raised knee. It split in half easily, like a dry stick, and she tossed the pieces to the side.

“So maybe I'll play with you instead,” there was a chilling sound like a malevolent approximation of a giggle, “*cherie.*”

The feeds from Ryuko burst into life again; wherever she was, she was plummeting, her internal altimeter and the streaming clouds marking her descent. The stars were almost invisible now, the grey of her world only illuminated by the alternating red and green of navigation lights.

“Keep ya head down, Sis!”

The blonde girl charged, but Satsuki was already moving herself, swinging her body like a dancer. The rifle was no longer an issue. There was a chance.

It wasn't easy to fight a cyborg if you were completely human. It wasn't easy, but it wasn't impossible either. There were basic rules: *You might be able to break bricks, but don't think punches and kicks are going to get you anywhere, anywhere other than making some space if you're lucky. Use their weight and momentum against them. Whatever you do, don't let them grab hold of you.*

And there was one other thing too, something most were unaware of: most cyborgs couldn't react that quickly in a fight. An electronic nervous system was faster than old-fashioned biology, true enough, but there was always a delay where the brain interfaced to the cybernetics. Better still, muscle memory didn't work too well for cyborgs, not unless they had deep, deep neural integration – filaments of gold or carbon saturating the brain from surface to core – and there were only two people Satsuki knew of who were like that. So... cyborgs had to think when they fought. And Satsuki didn't have to think, because her body already knew what it had to do. It had its own network, traced in the scars that covered her:

some faint as wrinkles, some stark and pronounced. She might be a failure, but that network was the living record of a curriculum of self-preservation in which she'd excelled.

She pulled a pair of matt throwing knives from her belt, letting her trajectory flow into a roll and then a blurring foot sweep that only just failed to connect with the cyborg girl's leading leg. The sniper executed a ballistic straight-arm punch, but despite its speed and the shockwave Satsuki felt as it passed over her, its execution was clumsy, obvious. She corkscrewed upwards, driving one of the knives deep into the sniper's exposed armpit, a lethal strike that would have severed the axillary artery in a human. The girl sneered for a moment, and then the sneer turned to confusion as she tried to grab Satsuki and her shoulder joint jammed, the blade wedged firmly between moving surfaces.

You were a fool if you thought you'd stab a cyborg to death, but slim, hard blades could jam motors and block actuators, just as effectively as they could cut tendons.

Satsuki completed her spin, thrusting the second knife into the cyborg's left eye, pushing back on her right leg as she did so, starting to put space between them again. The final component: a twist of her torso that allowed her to bring her left leg up in a side-kick that hammered the blade deeper into the sniper's skull.

Optics were a good target for knives too, as long as they didn't have synthetic diamond lenses.

A moment of slow-motion as Satsuki landed and prepared her next attack. The cyborg's body eclipsed the facility's status lights as it arced backwards, acquiring a faint halo of orange, but at the last moment, when it seemed certain that she would tumble over the edge of the platform, she turned the fall into a balletic backward cartwheel and righted herself with a flourish. The ball of one foot rested precariously on the metal edge, the heel projecting out into empty air.

Damn. The fall wouldn't have killed her opponent, probably wouldn't even have damaged her, but it was a long way down and it would have bought precious seconds to get onto the roof and away.

"Quelle surprise."

The cyborg girl pulled the knife from her armpit and tumbled it delicately between her fingers for a moment before tossing it away. The black blade protruding from her head didn't seem to bother her particularly, though Satsuki could see where artificial muscles were trying to blink her vision clear in a macabre nervous tic.

"Maman will be so delighted that I caught myself an eagle on my hunt."

She flexed her right arm, and it opened from wrist to elbow; the reinforced shell moved clear and an articulated blade began to deploy, locking itself into a shape like a distorted scimitar with a broad, looped hilt. She gave it a couple of brief sweeps, as though she were testing its balance, and then leapt. It was a rapid, unpredictable attack, sword raised high and ready to strike, but as the distance between them closed, Satsuki saw the opening and moved too, a slight adjustment of position and stance, so that when the sniper landed it was alongside her,

not on top of her. She grabbed the cyborg's sword arm, letting her momentum lock the elbow joint and begin the throw that this time, surely, would send her off the platform.

And then a section of the girl's arm rotated through one-eighty degrees and the joint that had been locked was suddenly free to move again. Satsuki found herself being lifted off the ground in her own throw and smashed, face-up, onto the surface of the platform. The image from the data visor disappeared in static for a moment and then stabilized; above her she could see the skylight and grey of clouds and night black beyond them. That was strange... The visual feed from Ryuko was showing almost the same thing, and then the little sub-image rolled and suddenly she could see the tower of the complex and the pyramid skylight from above, filling and growing in the field of view like an oncoming juggernaut.

"I wonder. How high will you soar if I clip your wings, little bird?"

The sniper waved her blade over Satsuki's head, poking occasionally at the visor and the armor that covered her chest. Then she sighed impatiently.

"Ah well. *Quel dommage*. I thought you might last a little longer than that stupid rifle."

She raised her blade up to deliver the *coup de grace*. In the darkness of the glass pyramid Satsuki could see something else moving, darker black on black. Memories were moving with it.

"I've seen this before..." She could taste blood in her mouth as she spoke. The cyborg girl cocked her head to the side, confused and curious for an instant.

The light from the shattering skylight reached Satsuki first, milliseconds before the sound of breaking glass and fracturing metal. But the fragments of debris seemed to move slowly; something was coming through them faster: black hair, blue jeans, a piercing streak of red.

"Is that idiot trying to flatten the place..."

The sniper's sword began its inevitable path downwards, towards Satsuki's neck, and then twisted sharply to the side, deflected by a long red blade. Ryuko was still falling, but she'd slowed somehow, and Satsuki could now see a cable, fastened to her ankles and disappearing up into the darkness. Her sister rammed her sword into the platform floor, halting her descent completely. The cyborg had been caught by surprise, but she was recovering quickly and grabbed at Ryuko's free arm, trying to pull her down and into the fray. Ryuko, however, didn't try to dodge or pull away to avoid the hold; Satsuki could see the satisfied smile on her sister's face as instead she grabbed the sniper's wrist equally firmly, swung her into the air with a simple sweep of her arm and then smashed her down onto the platform like she'd been hit by a meteor. The plates and beams of the platform floor bent and buckled around her. The girl jerked and shuddered as she lay, arms and legs twitching as though she were trying to get back up, but for the moment, at least, the impact seemed beyond her capacity for self-repair.

Ryuko slipped her arm carefully under her sister and then twisted her blade to disengage her anchor. The stored elastic energy of the cable was suddenly released and the two of them shot back into the air and out through the broken skylight. Ryuko's hold was firm as a harness around her waist, and as the pain in Satsuki's back and head began to subside she twisted

briefly to look back at the shattered roof of the building; at the epicenter of the newly-made crater the cyborg sniper was still shaking and trying to stand, one arm grasping up at them. The figure receded into darkness, washed out by illumination from neighboring buildings, and Satsuki looked up again, at grey clouds tinted polychrome by the city lights.

“I don’t want to appear ungrateful,” there was a grin from Ryuko at the phrase that always preceded a little homily, “but we lack sufficient kinetic energy to make it back up onto whatever you arrived on.”

“I’m not a complete idiot, Sis. Here comes our ride.”

The cable was going slack now, they were decelerating and had almost reached the peak of their ascent, but something black was coming down through the clouds towards them. They slowed, came to rest, began to fall again and then the cargo drone slipped neatly underneath them, the resulting impact no more jarring than flopping onto a firm bed. The whine of the quad rotors increased as the drone began to gain altitude, lifting them through the clouds and into the darkness beyond.

They lay there a while, motionless in the thin, clear air above the clouds, and then Satsuki slipped off the data visor, letting her short, dark hair spill out. The stars were silver now, the sky deeper black, no longer the muted greys of the preceding hours.

“The aberration in the flight path will be noticed, surely.”

“Nah... Lost engine power for a while. Nothin’ too unusual. It’s pretty old... Needs servicin’.”

The water droplets they’d passed through on their ascent through the clouds were beginning to freeze, making the surface of the cargo drone glassy and chilling. Fine crystals of ice were frosting Satsuki’s stealth suit, and the same silvery dusting began to cover Ryuko’s hair, turning it grey.

The drone was only a few yards on a side, but although it seemed stable enough – the big rotors at each corner keeping it effortlessly level – there wasn’t much to hold onto. Satsuki could see where Ryuko had tight hold of a service handle, the synthetic muscles of her arm bulging slightly with effort. The drone rocked slightly in a gust of wind, and the arm around her waist tightened for a moment.

“And if we should encounter turbulence and I slide off?”

“I’d jump after ya and catch ya.”

But despite the bravado of the claim, Ryuko released her sister for a moment and swiftly attached a length of climbing rope from her own belt to Satsuki’s utility harness with a pair of karabiners.

“There. We’re hitched. Satisfied?”

Satsuki snorted.

“Opportunist.”

The stars were sliding by gently now, as the drone made its way slowly towards its destination.

“And what cargo are we sharing our passage with?”

Ryuko was uncharacteristically silent for a moment; she just looked straight upwards, avoiding her sister’s gaze and question. A pause, then:

“Absolutely no idea.”

Satsuki gave a non-committal shrug.

“We should dump some of it.” She began to feel for any panels that would give access to the drone’s controls. “With our extra weight, and that little excursion, it might not have sufficient fuel to reach its destination.”

“I guess. Someone’ll be disappointed, though.”

In the end they jettisoned a few boxes out over the bay, and copies of “A Class of Lilies: Volume 10” washed up on the city shoreline for days afterwards, their white pages fluttering in the wind like feasting seabirds.

“If you could just spread your legs a little further.”

“If I had a hundred Yen for every time...”

“You’d have one hundred Yen, I imagine.”

Ryuko’s head watched with detachment from its position on a support frame, her arm scratching at her ear occasionally, as Satsuki checked out her body.

“Ouch. No one ever teach ya not to pick on kids younger than ya?”

A pair of screws on Ryuko’s smooth inner thigh were sticking slightly, and her sister adjusted them carefully with a jeweler’s screwdriver.

“No. Quite the opposite, in fact.” Satsuki straightened up slightly, and replaced the screwdriver on the palette of tools. “But fortunately for you that’s a lesson I’ve chosen to forget.”

She tapped a pair of keys on the unit next to her, and the maintenance table that was holding Ryuko’s body, minus her head and right arm, tilted a few more degrees towards the vertical.

“E7 through E15, if you would, Ryuko.”

“Sure thing.”

A faint whir, and a clicking like the motion of tiny latches: a set of panels opened in precise sequence, unfolding at the top of her left leg where Satsuki had already removed the artificial skin. Satsuki grasped the thigh firmly, gave it a quarter-turn twist, and the leg detached, revealing a polished titanium ball-and-socket joint. She leant over fully to look up at the inner surface of the joint, checking for wear or damage, and Ryuko was forced to stifle an involuntary cough as it became distractingly apparent that her sister was wearing painfully little under the resilient white material of her cleanroom suit.

“Is there something amiss with my *gluteus maximus*? ”

“I wasn’t...” and then Ryuko had to laugh, any pretense at innocence impossible to maintain. “Ya sure yer not a cyborg, Sis? Eyes in the back of your head? Brain up in some big orbital data center somewhere?”

Satsuki pushed her hair back up under the elastic of the white cap she was wearing, and then brought up a high-powered magnifier, something between a monocle and a telescope, so she could inspect the end of Ryuko’s metallic femur. There was the subtlest of smiles, but Ryuko was far from being in a position to observe it.

“It would have to be a particularly large satellite.”

“Yeah.” Ryuko began to laugh again. “Probably need one of those big ol’ Russian cargo lifters to get it into orbit.”

The joint shimmered under the strip lighting as Satsuki turned it carefully; then she took a soft cloth, moistened it with pure alcohol, and wiped the ball and stem of the joint before inspecting it again.

“Hmmm... There’s a crack developing.” She twisted it slightly, letting the stark, white light dance on its surface, and tutted quietly. “You’re lucky your leg didn’t detach during that little extravaganza.”

Ryuko’s discrete arm pulled down her right eyelid as best it could as she stuck out her tongue – cybernetic *akanbe*.

“How about I leave ya behind next time?”

“Have I ever asked that you inconvenience yourself on my behalf?”

No. No, she never had. Which made it an obligation weightier than any oath, any blood-bond, anything sworn on pain of death or worse. Because they’d never asked anything of each other, because there’d never been anyone to ask, not for most of a lifetime.

“We’ll need some more titanium so that I can machine you a new one.”

Ryuko’s chest rose and fell, strangely decoupled from the sigh Satsuki could hear behind her.

“Needin’ a hip replacement at my age.”

She aligned the leg carefully, and then Satsuki pressed it firmly back into place, feeling the magnetic guides take hold, and the muscles begin to reconnect in sequence. She'd never had much time for music, never had much feel for the joy of it – which was yet another thing that frustrated Ryuko, and Nonon, all her friends really – but the sound of Ryuko's body operating, configuring and reconfiguring, was musically satisfying, she supposed. It was a secret mechanical delight, like an old, steam-powered pipe organ at a funfair, with its short rondos of recalibration.

"Well, if you refuse to eat your kale, what do you expect?"

Ryuko rolled her eyes testily. It remained a mystery why she was required to eat a supposedly healthy diet; it wasn't as though she was going to put on weight, even if it was true that one too many sodas tended to pit the polished white ceramic of her teeth. She'd picked up coffee stains on them too, once or twice, until Satsuki had demanded that she brush them, morning and night, just as she did.

"Want me to fire off an order?"

Within the Wired, Ryuko began to rummage through the data of their mutual finances, finally settling on a cache of untraceable digital currency.

"If you could."

Ryuko was trying to be helpful; it wouldn't do to interfere. But there were a few seconds of silence, and then a reluctant question.

"Uh..." Her head affected its most disarming grin. "Can ya order titanium from Amazon?"

Satsuki shook her head with a smile.

"Perhaps there's sufficient left in the vault." *Customers who ordered titanium ingots also ordered trainers (white, Velcro fastenings) and guitar strings.* "Don't trouble yourself."

The air vent rattled for a moment, carrying a little energy from a train passing far above them. They were deep, deep underground – many yards below the Toei Oedo line – but the conduits ran close to the tracks and tunnels as they meandered to the surface. If you stopped close to the vents and felt the tentative breeze of recirculated air across your cheek, then sometimes the low beast roar of the metro would reach you. The little lab had been a bunker once, so they believed: the bad dream offspring of nuclear nightmares in the seventies. Something spacious, palatial even, compared to the jostling proximity of the buildings above; plenty of space to maintain Ryuko's body, and space enough to analyze the spoils of their unofficial employment. And Ryuko liked this room, even though she had no interest in the precise mechanisms that kept her alive, and less still in pure science. The lab, with its shelves stacked high with tools and meters, was close enough to the bike shop where she spent her days, arguing with Kinagase and occasionally making repairs to the Yamahas, Hondas and Kawasakis that the local punks brought in. It wasn't bad to be a machine, she had to admit, if it meant you had such a careful mechanic.

"So. Your admirer. Who was she?"

She sometimes wondered if the bikes also got jealous, when she spent more time with one than another. The occasional misfire and temperamental ECU suggested... but, no, that wasn't something she wanted to consider.

"She' was an 'it', I suspect."

Ryuko raised her eyebrows, and yards away her body started slightly in surprise, causing her sister to place her hand gently on her belly to steady it on the support frame.

"An A.I.? No way. Why'd ya think that?"

Satsuki tilted her head slightly to the side, a gesture of thoughtful uncertainty she rarely permitted herself.

"She was fast, and..."

"Faster'n me?"

This was dangerous ground, causing Satsuki to momentarily consider the treatises of Sun Tzu and other master strategists before giving her response.

"More... unpredictable than you."

There'd been the trick with the arm too; that was something that even Ryuko would have found difficult. Difficult to override that inbuilt knowledge of how your body ought to move, even if you didn't have one.

Ryuko's leg had completely reattached now, its interdigitated plates fitting so close together that there were mere whispers of lines separating them, and forming a skinless band of shining composite like a stocking-top. What color should she use? Ivory... Peach... Blush... Tan... Satsuki ran a finger along the nearby shelves, considering the hues and shades of the canisters of synthetic skin that were stored there. Most had names: a few select ones only Pantone numbers. That had caused problems once, when a roughly scrawled selection on a fragment of notepad had been misread and made Ryuko *kogal-tanned*, rather than the 'pale and interesting' she'd demanded.

She took down a little can and then began to brush the contents carefully along the top of Ryuko's thigh, covering the inch-wide gap where the plates of her shell had re-engaged. The match was good, disaster averted. She'd never considered that her skill with calligraphy would have some practical application, but this appeared to be it. Sometimes, out on the streets of Akihabara as the two of them walked together, she'd see people who'd not had the patience, or money, to get this finishing done carefully. Their skin would be bumped and peeling, like sunburn or acne, plastic or metal clearly visible beneath. But all it required was care, a good quality sable brush, and a steady hand. Refitting Ryuko's legs was always the most challenging task, though: the shape of her body, and those difficult, difficult curves... Satsuki slipped the brush between her upper thighs, trying to get a uniform coating over the pseudo muscles there, and Ryuko's body jerked suddenly, almost causing her to draw a broad pale stripe across the dark hair above.

“Did I...?” Her hand was shaking slightly from concentration.

“Nah...” There was an odd sound like Ryuko had swallowed hard, weirdly resonant in her open neck. “It just tickles when the synth-skin starts to bind...”

Satsuki leant back and watched as the skin started to set and become active. The intricate line of the joint was invisible now, the skin perfectly smooth and blemish free. Her sister could have chosen hair of any color, anime blue or green, shocking pink or bleached blonde, but aside from the rebellious streak of red in her fringe, Ryuko had always insisted on a black that shimmered blue when the street lights caught it. Just a shade different from Satsuki’s own. She claimed the old man had sequenced her DNA and said that was the color her hair would have been if it hadn’t been burnt charcoal black when he found her. From a little distance, even from close up, it looked perfectly natural – she looked intimately human.

Ryuko’s body extended out from the support frame, allowing Satsuki to begin painting the back of her leg. A little doubt was nagging at her, and concentrating on completing Ryuko’s maintenance was making it worse, not better.

“The sniper. She said ‘*Maman*’.”

“So...?”

Ryuko was apparently disinterested, but occasionally her body would shimmy slightly.

“It’s French.”

“I know it’s French, Satsuki. I did bother to turn up at school once or twice.”

“Mother spoke French.”

“The French speak French, Sis.”

The brush made one final horizontal pass, smoothing off the setting skin along the curve of what would have been the muscles of Ryuko’s backside.

“A French A.I.?”

“Why not?”

“It’s not inconceivable. Dassault Systèmes, perhaps...”

The task of restoring her sister was complete, and Satsuki rose and began the careful postscript of cleaning the brush. The normal solvents for synthetic skin would have damaged the sable, rendering the bristles stiff and brittle, so instead she worked plain soap and water into it, running her fingers firmly over and through the dark hair until it was clean and soft again. It was one of those chores that was normally inherently relaxing: but not today. Something sharp couldn’t be worked free.

“She had a sword like yours.”

Pause. Heartbeat. A few billion cycles of neural augmentation.

“Yeah. I saw. Heh... The old man, always rippin’ stuff off from other people...”

It wasn’t that convincing; Ryuko wasn’t even sure she’d convinced herself. She couldn’t help but listen that little bit more carefully, hearing the tiny, recognizable change in Satsuki’s breathing: the subtle shift in surface ripples that hinted at deeper currents fathoms down. There was a wreck down there. It was a long way down, but it hadn’t slipped into the abyss forever yet. It didn’t bother Ryuko, because it had never been much of her life, but sometimes... sometimes maybe the tide went out, the water became a little shallower, and she’d find her sister looking out to sea where something dark was visible beneath the surface.

“She’s not coming back, Satsuki. We got her, remember?”

“I remember.”

Satsuki stopped cleaning the brush, and stood it carefully to dry.

“Ya cut her head off with that crazy sword of yours. And I crushed her skull like the rotten egg it was. Bang! Brains, titanium, wiring, all over the place. She’s not coming back after that.”

Ryuko waved both her arms enthusiastically, making a gesture that encompassed half the room. It seemed to do little to lift her sister’s mood.

“Her body fell into the culvert. We never recovered it.”

“We weren’t in any shape to go after it. Currents probably swept it out to the bottom of the bay by now.”

“Hmmmm.”

That was the thoughtful sound that hinted at a temporary suspension of the discussion, not its resolution. Ryuko tried her best, most mischievous, kid-sister grin, and saw Satsuki’s shoulders relax a little. After all, there was still work to be done; one more task in the periodic servicing of Ryuko’s cyborg body, and something she trusted no one other than her sister to perform. She allowed her body to settle itself carefully back on the support frame, and Satsuki pulled on a pair of sterile latex gloves, before slipping a face mask – familiar whiteness from the packed winter metro – over her nose and mouth.

“If you could release your core interlocks, Ryuko.”

A faint line traced around her collarbone, initially so subtle you might think it was a trick of the light, or a the barest of wrinkles. The lines of creeping darkness met at Ryuko’s sternum and slipped downwards between her breasts, the artificial skin breaking apart gently as her chest began to open, and then they separated again, parting along the curves of her ribcage.

“Dunno why people insist on keepin’ their brains in their heads. Way too easy to get ’em knocked around.”

Satsuki stepped back slightly, making space around her sister.

“A bad habit born of millions of years of evolution, perhaps.”

The plates and muscles moved outwards and to the sides, revealing Ryuko’s core, a vessel marked with three simple lines, almost like a haiku:

MATOI INDUSTRIAL
KAMUI CLASS
「鮮血」

The old man had clearly felt some pride in his handiwork, as embossed to one side, as though it were an *ukiyo-e* print, was his signature:

纏
一
身
筆

Designed by Isshin Matoi.

Satsuki placed her hand gently on the smooth, armored surface of the capsule that contained all that remained of her sister.

“Hello, Ryuko.”

“Hey there, Sis...”

Her voice echoed in the little lab, impossible to pinpoint.

In the Wired, as in her dreams, Ryuko was whole again. An adult flesh and blood body reconstituted from a memory of something she had never had, not the strange, sophisticated mechanism she inhabited now. A real body that could feel, and not just tell her how it felt. She’d met other people, over the years, other people who’d lost limbs and said that the replacements were every bit as good, if not better, than the originals. But Ryuko had nothing but fragmentary slices to compare her present day, present time with – no clear memories of her life before she was *installed* – and no way to understand the recollections within her that could somehow still create piercingly clear sensations within the Wired. Her cyborg body was like the closest of friends, willing to share the most intimate details of its experiences, but no matter how vivid the description, they were always the experiences of another: stories, and not memories. Her heart beat only in dreams and in the Wired; and though she sometimes met her sister in her sleep, the Wired was the one place that Satsuki could not follow her.

She’d heard it was true of all full-body cyborgs, particularly those who’d been installed when they were very young, but Ryuko’s presence in the Wired was the most fully-realized of all her friends; her body was complete in every detail, and if she pricked her finger there a little bead of blood would form for a moment before drifting away and evaporating. Even Inumuta, with the near-limitless computing resource his employment afforded, seemed insubstantial and roughly sketched alongside her. And the best Satsuki could manage was primitive sort of

3D model, no more detailed than a character from an old arcade game, that she could move clumsily, like manipulating a puppet, when she could be bothered at all. So sometimes she only spoke, a disembodied voice in the infinite spaces between the subnets, but mostly when they met in the Wired, she just typed, her only representation a few lines of neat, monospaced font, like an old typewriter. In the end, most of what Ryuko knew of her sister, she'd learnt like reading a book.

"We're going to need to replace your fluid support." A few graphs were dipping periodically into the red on the neat little unit Satsuki had pulled over.

"Oil change, huh? Thought it was 'bout time."

In the brilliant whiteness of the medical refrigerator in the corner of the lab were packs of nutrient solution, the exotic mix of compounds required to keep Ryuko's brain alive. It was possible to survive on a synthetic mixture – a generic stew of proteins, enzymes and other chemicals – and indeed, that was what she'd lived on for more than a decade. But it was far better to have something synthesized from a donor who was genetically close: someone like a parent, or like a sister.

"How are you finding these?" Satsuki scrutinized a pack carefully – checking manufacturing lot and expiry date.

"Great, great. Gettin' smarter every time I have some."

"Any side-effects?"

"Other than likin' tea and being stuffy like a dusty old library? Nah."

Satsuki held a pouch up as though she were assessing the color of a glass of vintage wine.

"It doesn't seem to be improving your comportment, alas. Perhaps that was too much for me to hope for."

It was an entire afternoon of giving blood just to make a single one, and perhaps that was why she felt so tired recently. Perhaps that was why she was light-headed around her sister sometimes. Lack of iron: something easily remedied via small changes to her diet. It seemed logical, and in any case it would be churlish to complain: the afternoons of donation were an excuse to sit and read and not be interrupted. Her gift, such as it was, was only a more sophisticated version of applying antiseptic and Band-Aids to childhood scrapes; in another universe five-year-old Ryuko climbed trees and grazed knees, and six-year-old Satsuki wiped tears and dabbed at cuts with clean cotton buds. She thought of that universe often as she read, and the transfusion pump beside her ticked quietly as she became a little lesser – giving herself to her sister – with each turn of its rotor.

"You could do the transfusion yourself, if you wished. I know you're self-conscious about this."

There was a chuckle, an embarrassed sort of chuckle, and Ryuko's free arm ran fingers through her hair.

"Nah, nah. Ya know I'm no good with science 'n' stuff. I'd end up just fillin' myself with tea or Pocari Sweat."

"As you wish." Neither would admit the relief they felt at that resolution.

Satsuki checked the fit of her mask and pulled on a pair of lab goggles for good measure; then she sprayed liberally around Ryuko's open torso with a powerful sterilizing spray. Getting bacteria, or indeed any other sort of contamination, into the cerebral support system was a fast-track route to a potentially fatal case of encephalitis.

The pristine pouch was fitted into the transfusion unit, and Satsuki unsealed two lengths of clear piping which she ran between it and Ryuko's core. Within a few seconds the outlet tube was full with fluid, slightly opaque with use and age, as her new offering forced it out with its crystal purity. She nodded slightly as the pump began to count up progress through the operation. Ryuko couldn't see her face, but the unwelcome shift in posture was clear enough, even across the room. Her sister was ruminating again, and without a proper challenge to occupy her it was likely she'd drift into unwelcome, somber territory.

"So... I was wonderin'. How close are cousins, genetics-wise?"

It wasn't much of a plan, but it was better than nothing: even if it might end up embarrassing them both.

"Fifty percent, I suppose you might say to a first approximation." Satsuki turned to face her, surprised at the sudden interest in biology when scientific curiosity usually stopped at the performance of the latest turbo or ceramic brakes.

"And distant cousins, even less'n that?"

"Certainly."

Ryuko switched in her most enticing grin, letting her uneven tooth catch roguishly on her bottom lip.

"So... since there's only a few percent of me left, we're not that related, are we? So nothing to say we couldn't... y'know..."

She gave a wink that she hoped was just the right mix of mischievous and wholesome, and was relieved when she saw Satsuki relax slightly; the faintest of smiles danced across her lips.

"An imaginative solution, Miss Casanova."

"Well, I gave ya my heart already." Ryuko's gaze flicked up to a micro circulatory pump, lying on the shelves. "One of 'em, anyway."

"And I broke it, if memory serves."

"Butterfingers."

Blue eyes locked with blue, and they held each other's gaze. Long, long enough for Satsuki to be sure she could read "Carl Zeiss | Heimdallr" in pica around Ryuko's iris, and then a little longer than was comfortable. For once it was Ryuko who looked away first.

"Ya know I'm jokin', right?"

"Yes."

"Ya know she's not comin' back, *right?*"

"Yes."

Good enough.

"Hug?" As a question it was a little hopeful, but Ryuko was surprised when Satsuki ran her fingers through her hair, brushing the red of her fringe out of her eyes. She leant forward a little, trying to position herself around the support frame, but Ryuko coughed and glanced briefly across the room at her body.

"I'm over there. Dummy."

The transfusion system beeped completion and Satsuki blushed slightly, an event as rare as planetary alignment.

"My apologies."

The serpentine coils of the pumping system were detached and discarded, and then Satsuki placed her arms around Ryuko's body, squeezing gently against the resistance of advanced alloys and polymer composites. Ryuko's left arm came up and squeezed back in turn, hand running over the back of Satsuki's head where her hair was tucked into her cleanroom bonnet. And then for appearance's sake, if nothing else, she squeezed comedically hard – something just the safe side of rib-crushing.

Ryuko closed her eyes and tried to record the sensations of the moment. Her body told her that Satsuki's thighs were pressed against hers, that her arms met at the small of her back, that her breasts were pressed through the cleanroom suit to her open torso, just above her core. She could categorize the feelings as *tender*. It was another story, the story of someone who cared very deeply for her. But it was still just a story. She wondered if her body was enjoying it, whether it was moved by it in the way it should have been.

Little by little, Satsuki released her embrace and the plates and structures of Ryuko's chest came together again, sealing her remnants away. The divisions where they'd separated were almost invisible now, only the faintest of lines where the synthetic skin didn't quite bridge the boundaries flawlessly.

Satsuki slipped off the mask, gloves and bonnet, bundling them together with practiced finesse and tossing them the full length of the room to land precisely in the disposal bin. A few passes of long fingers through her hair and then she smoothly unzipped her cleanroom suit and let it slide to the floor, forming a puddle of plasticized white fibers at her feet. Ryuko

allowed her head to pout a little; the storm-cloud colors of bruises were clear on her sister's back, a visual record of her recent encounter with the A.I. sniper.

She's not indestructible.

That wasn't something she liked to think about. Satsuki was always meticulous, always cautious. In that respect, she was impossible to fault. But being careful wasn't quite the same as taking care of herself, now was it? Ryuko looked critically at the plain white of her underwear, the holes at the hip where the fabric had almost worn through near the elastic, probably the same, boring set that she'd worn as a schoolgirl; she certainly didn't treat herself to any luxuries these days. At least when she'd run the conglomerate she'd had smart clothes to wear for work, and elegant gowns for formal engagements.

Satsuki slipped on a plain, pastel blouse and pulled up the nondescript skirt that must have come from some low-tier department store; something that wouldn't even have graced the floors of Matsuya or Mitsukoshi, let alone the ladieswear section beneath the elegant clock of Ginza Wako where she'd once shopped. She deftly fitted the custom contact lenses that made her authentically myopic, and then immediately undid their effect with a cheap pair of owlsh glasses from a railway station convenience store. But she put in the little pearl studs that Ryuko had bought her for her last birthday. She did that, at least.

A look in the lab's mirror, and a little wriggle to settle things into place.

"How do I look?"

"Like a sexy librarian," Ryuko retorted. It was a joke, but that didn't make it any the less true. The dowdy ensemble wasn't doing much to disguise a poised, purposeful stance.

"Not too sexy, I hope."

Ryuko laughed wickedly.

"Bet they're just queuein' up to be punished for late returns."

Satsuki said nothing. She couldn't deny that attendance at the library had improved markedly since she had started working there.

"How's it goin', anyway?"

"The library? The city council cut the funding again." Satsuki sighed. "I had to make another anonymous donation to keep it open."

Ryuko rolled her eyes so hard that for a moment she thought she'd see the metallic interior of her own skull.

"Payin' yourself to sit around old books all day. Crazy."

"Some people still like books, Ryuko. The elderly. People whose implants are damaged. Cybernetic invalids..." There was a wan smile of resignation. "Like me."

“Sis...”

But she'd already made a little shrug of acceptance, and was fitting the fake spinal interface to the back of her neck, pressing with firm fingertips so that the adhesive pads held it tightly in place. There was no legislation against being entirely human, of course, such a thing would have been utterly unthinkable; you were still permitted to carry an external ID or passport, to pay with credit cards or cash as you saw fit. Many of the elderly preferred it that way, and age was still respected in Japan even if elsewhere their complaints tended to be shunted aside. But a young woman of Satsuki's age without implant or augmentation? That was more unusual than a full body prosthesis. And while Ryuko was happy for the attention – How fast could she run? How high could she jump? – Satsuki's secondary line of business, what she did in the evening when the library was closed and the ladders had been slid on silent runners deep between the stacks, required she not draw attention to herself. So the appearance of connectivity to the Wired was necessary and sufficient; and if people asked, or suggested a hard link to some system or another, she'd politely decline and produce the manufacturer's note that indicated a fault in the unit and its impending repair. Then people were understanding, sympathetic even, as though she'd lost her sight, or the use of a limb. In theory she could even use the priority seating on the metro or the commuter trains, but that would have been to take the charade a little too far. In a world where people spoke glibly of their ghosts, she was exactly that; if she switched off the little terminal she carried with her then she became insubstantial, undetectable, as ephemeral in the Wired as mist on the forest hillsides.

“I'm going to feed the children before I go.” Satsuki gathered her things and started towards the surface elevator.

“It's meant to be Lady Satsuki Kiryuin. Not Crazy Cat Lady Satsuki Kiryuin.” Ryuko was none too happy about sharing their small apartment with an ever-increasing feline contingent.

“It's just Miss Satsuki Kiryuin these days, Ryuko.”

The title was gone. The title was gone, just as the mansion was gone, and the antiques, and the offices and the corporate jet and so many other things. Everything but a few unrecorded, unremarkable, utilitarian buildings in unfashionable parts of the city and a financial reserve sufficient for survival, if not excess. It was a year since officials had arrived at the mansion, bearing a court order to seize the assets of the Kiryuin family, and had been confused to find everything within neatly packaged and catalogued. Satsuki had handed over a manifest of the mansion contents, shouldered a single rucksack, and set off, on foot, down the long driveway, not looking back as the police began to seal the doors. She sometimes wished she'd put a match to it all, but there were antiques and treasures there that others saw value in and would lament the loss of; she wouldn't deprive them, because only she could see the blood that was steeped into the floorboards, paintings and manuscripts.

The elevator pinged its arrival in the lower depths, and Ryuko realized she was likely to be left in the lab in her present indisposed state.

“Hey! Ya just gonna leave me hanging around like this?”

“Pull yourself together, Ryuko.” Satsuki was smiling, but behind the deceptive glasses her eyes were serious. The past, any discussion of the past, had a tendency to provoke that response.

“Very funny!”

Ryuko tried to move her body off the support frame, but the bindings wouldn’t disengage quickly enough. The warm, orange light from the elevator shuttered as Satsuki touched the controls and the doors began to move.

“That’s why yer still single!” Ryuko shouted.

She watched as the doors to the elevator slid closed.

That’s why you’re still single.

A entirely human woman, as efficient and unwavering as the most sophisticated machine. A girl who never joked, save when she was most serious. A sister who was... a paradox. A paradox girl.

That’s why we’re still single.

She sighed, and let her body rummage in the messenger bag she’d brought down with her. Satsuki didn’t approve of food being brought into the lab, but if she wasn’t there to complain... Ryuko pulled out a fresh lemon, tossing it across the room for her right arm to catch nimbly, and bit into it. It was delicious: bitter and sharp, but with just a hint of sweetness beneath. She smiled.

Contradiction is truth.

That seemed to be written into Satsuki’s very DNA, she thought, as she chewed thoughtfully.

She’d taken several mouthfuls before she remembered that her head wasn’t attached, and half-eaten pieces were dropping through her neck onto the floor below her.

Satsuki rode the little service elevator up from the sub-basement to the two bed apartment at the top of the building. The other tenants, and the shop keepers who ran the stores at street level, would perhaps have been surprised to discover that the quiet young librarian who paid her bills on time and rarely spoke at residents’ meetings was the owner of the entire building, and several others around it. The monthly rent payments, paid assiduously on the 1st, were channeled through numbered accounts and across continents, and none of them had the skills, or interest, to trace them. They sometimes gossiped a little about the young woman’s scruffy companion: her friend, or cousin, or “friend”. But the girl with the cybernetic body was pleasant in an admittedly uncultured sort of way, good with children, and always helped the more elderly tenants with their groceries if she met them on the stairwell. So perhaps the two of them were related after all, even if their personalities seemed very different.

The group of four cats swirled around Satsuki’s legs like flowing water as she emerged into the kitchen. She picked up Yomi and fixed her with the stern gaze of a commanding officer,

as Shiro and Kuro pressed themselves firmly against her calves. Maru, the elderly ginger tomcat, sat back and looked at her with curiosity.

“Your tour of duty is over, little one. You’re a civilian now.” She gave Yomi a brief hug, and then remembered the mysterious property of cat hair that made it visible against clothes of any color. She held the cat up again, and made a small bow. “For the loan of your good fortune, I thank you.”

Yomi gave a chirrup of acknowledgement and began to purr softly; Satsuki placed her carefully back on the floor beside her colleagues and then opened the refrigerator. First shelf or third shelf – her hand hovered between the normal tuna and the *toro* she’d bought for that day’s dinner. Ryuko would complain, but... she remembered the flattened bullet over her heart and took out the *toro*, placing the little packet on the countertop.

It was another grey day, featureless cloud stretching out to the horizon. The waters of the bay, visible from the window above the sink, were dark greens and darker greys, churning and boiling in the energetic wind. She began to wash her hands carefully, and then noticed with displeasure that Ryuko had left the best of the sushi knives unwashed in a bowl of soapy water.

“Matoi...” It was almost a growl, and the cats moved slightly away from her, fur bristling.

She’d start cutting vegetables with Ryuko’s Scissorblade, if her sister didn’t start taking better care of the few luxuries they still retained. She ran a damp cloth carefully over the layered edge of the knife, trying to work the residues free.

Ryuko’s Scissorblade. The similar sword the A.I. sniper had wielded. *Tetsuzan*, the anti-cyborg weapon her father had left her the designs for. Something was buried in the folded metal and intricate layers of their blades that linked them all together.

She’d looked back for a moment as Ryuko had hoisted her into the air, twisting against the pain in her back, to see if the sniper would attempt to pursue them. She’d seen the fine, blonde hair spilling out in two great curls around the girl’s head, the sightless eye, the black mote of the throwing knife clearly visible against the surrounding whiteness, the arm grasping up at them.

She’d seen lips move, soundless in the distance. The data visor had picked out syllables, trying, and failing, to resolve them into intelligible Japanese, as Satsuki’s own skill in lip-reading had raced far ahead:

La

Vie

Est

Drôle

She looked out over the bay, towards distant towers barely visible through fog. There was a figure in white moving slowly on the shoreline, hunched against the wind, detail impossible to resolve. As Satsuki watched, it turned, seemingly aware of her gaze; whether it was a trick of the light, or an accident of posture, the head was still bowed and impossible to make out clearly.

The knife slipped in her hands, catching her thumb momentarily; a single droplet of dark crimson dripped into the sink, spreading its network of red tendrils across the stainless steel and into the clear water.

*As if with wardens posted
On slopes of Tsukuba Mountain near and far,
My mother's gaze is on me;
But our ghosts have met.*

- Anonymous, *Manyōshū*

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